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SA

SUBJECT: JEDDAH'S SITTEEN BRIDGE: CONGEN OFFICERS WITNESS
DEPORTATION OF FOREIGN WORKERS

Classified By: CG Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In the process of confirming a Saudi newspaper story that Indonesian workers were congregating under a Jeddah bridge awaiting deportation, ConGen officers spoke to several prospective deportees while observing hundreds being loaded into busses en route to the deportation center. Learning of FSOs' presence at the scene, a Saudi police colonel later raised the specter of "PNGing" officers, claiming the incident had raised the ire of senior SAG officials in Jeddah. ConGen FSN was briefly detained as were Bangladeshi workers to whom officers had spoken. To date no official SAG complaint has been received. END SUMMARY.

2.(C) On February 8, ConGen officers observed the deportation of several hundred foreign workers, including many Indonesians, at Sitteen Bridge in South Jeddah. Acting on information published in a February 1 Arabic daily Okaz article and in an effort to confirm other rumors, officers visited the deportation scene, known to be the place where illegal workers and overstayers congregate awaiting transportation by police to deportation centers. Sitteen Bridge is located near a commercial plaza with shops, a bank, and a petrol station in an area brightly lit with vendors hawking wares and services. During a typical day one to two thousand foreign workers -- Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indonesian -- mostly men but with some women (in a gender-segregated area) camp out in make-shift tents under the highway.

DEPARTING BANGLADESHI BAKER

3.(C) A typical case was a Bangladeshi baker who claimed to have worked at a Riyadh bakery for three years though not paid even a month of salary with his sponsor refusing to grant an exit visa at the conclusion of the contract. The baker said he came, destitute, to the Sitteen Bridge in order to expedite his departure, noting that many of those waiting had been trying to get deported for days, but that deportation busses were often full and did not appear every day.

DEPORTATION PROCESS -- NO VIOLENCE

¶4. (C) Upon the arrival of a Saudi police vehicle, a crowd of about 500 began clustering into a tight group, forming several orderly lines near the tents. Exiting their vehicles, police walked toward the cluster. Eventually a small group of 10-15 Asian men asked to join the deportees, were initially refused, but were finally placed at the front

of the queue, to the displeasure of the rest. Police appeared to treat the workers generally well, and the situation was calm and orderly. While some police occasionally raised their voices and ordered workers about and others carried police batons, ConGen officers witnessed no violence or actual mistreatment. During the round-up process, one Saudi was witnessed dropping off and bidding farewell to what appeared to be a family of foreign workers. Another Saudi arrived at the scene and distributed food packages to waiting deportees, in what seemed to be a "Good Samaritan" gesture.

5.(C) Through an LES interpreter, ConGen officers thought it prudent to identify themselves to the ranking Saudi policeman who granted them permission to remain at the scene as long as no photographs or notes were taken and they didn't speak to the deportees.

LOAD 'EM UP, SHIP 'EM OUT

¶6. (C) Several minutes into the process, four busses arrived, equipped with security doors separating the passengers from the driver. Workers' papers were carefully checked as they were methodically loaded into busses. At one point a vehicle with a Saudi driver transporting several African women and a few younger African men arrived. The African women joined the other females and the males (who appeared to be part of the same family) were granted priority access to a bus. The Saudi driver appeared to be executing a routine drop-off of workers for deportation. Some deportees seemed to be prioritized for admission to the deportation center and may

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have been Hajj/Umrah over-stayers. Usually in possession of their passports, over-stayers are relatively easy to deport since no sponsor is involved. A group of women, likely Indonesian including several with infants, were granted priority access to an all-female bus. While several hundred deportees found seats on busses, the rest were obliged to wait for another day or longer. Up to 12 busses arrive daily on an irregular schedule, with each bus ferrying about 50 passengers to the deportation center. Consulates of some countries of origin apparently inform their citizens about the Sitteen Bridge area in order to facilitate their repatriation.

¶7. (C) According to police, most foreigners arriving at the deportation center are visa over-stayers who are quickly processed for exit. For departing workers the process is more complex since an effort is made to contact sponsors to determine whether or not the intending deportee has committed a crime. Some workers are simply returned to their sponsors. A police captain claimed that most remain at the center for relatively short periods of time, several days or at most weeks, although we have it on good authority that the waiting period can stretch into months. Deportees with payment disputes are issued papers to pursue their claims through the courts or may be allowed to consult lawyers.

UNDERCOVER COP

¶8. (C) While observing the deportation process, ConGen officers were approached by a plainclothes policeman asking questions about the reason for their presence. "Are you human rights?" he asked in English. While not identifying himself, the plainclothesman was seen chatting with several uniformed policemen who were conducting the deportation.

SAG OFFICIALS UPSET?

¶9. (C) After ConGen officers departed the scene, the ARSO was contacted by the Saudi officer in charge of the diplomatic police in Jeddah, Colonel Badr Al-Shalhoob. On February 10 "Colonel Badr" appeared at the consulate claiming that the Governor of the Mecca Region, Prince Khalid Al-Faisal, as well as the MFA Director General for the Mecca Region,

Ambassador Mohammed Tayeb, were both unhappy about American diplomats being present at the deportation site. Badr noted that Ministry of Interior plainclothes officers had been monitoring the scene and remarked that without his (Badr's) support, the Americans' presence at the deportation scene could lead to their being declared "persona non grata." Badr informed us that the accompanying FSN and all Bangladeshis to whom officers had spoken had been detained and questioned.

(In fact, the FSN was briefly stopped and questioned by police after leaving work February 8.) Badr warned officers against "trespassing into internal affairs," recommending that he be contacted about any such visit and that a formal diplomatic note be submitted in the future before visiting such sites. While conceding that there was no rule against movement in public places, Badr insisted that such preventive measures were necessary in order "to protect diplomats from potential murderers," remarking that "all Afghans and Pakistanis were anti-American." Fabricating a plausible excuse or cover story, Badr said he would tell his MOI and MFA bosses that ConGen officers had happened upon the Sitteen Bridge area by accident while out on an excursion to the nearby gold suq.

PROBLEM INHERENT IN SAUDI SPONSORSHIP SYSTEM

¶10. (C) COMMENT. The deportation scene at Sitteen Bridge confirms reports that foreign workers falling on hard times or who are not paid by their employers gather at the spot in an effort to leave Saudi Arabia quickly and to get free passage home. Some, working illegally after overstaying Hajj/Umrab visas, use the process as a means to return home. Still others, arriving without documentation or sponsors, are unable to secure exit visas and go to Sitteen Bridge to be deported. In addition, a steady flow of laborers and domestic workers from impoverished countries arrive in Saudi Arabia on legal contracts, but later, for one reason or another, run away from their sponsors. Under Saudi law, a worker whose contract is concluded is entitled to be released

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with the sponsor obligated to arrange the exit visa and pay the worker's return travel. Deportees include workers who have run away from their sponsors in mid-contract (due to abuse or non-payment of wages) as well as workers whose contracts have terminated but whose sponsors simply dump them at the deportation center to avoid paying the return ticket. The deportation scene at the Sitteen Bridge speaks to great problems inherent in the Saudi "sponsorship system" which leaves workers with virtually no freedom of movement between employers.

¶11. (C) Media accounts confirmed by post indicate that the deportation process may itself be overwhelmed by the volume of those seeking to exit the Kingdom. Saudi officials give priority entry to the facility for those who are easiest to deport (illegal workers without sponsors). Workers with sponsors, such as the Indonesians who recently demonstrated in front of their Jeddah consulate, pose greater challenges to the Saudi deportation process.

¶12. (C) Saudi officials' presumed negative reaction to the presence of ConGen officers talking to foreign workers at a public deportation site may be evidence of the extent to which the Kingdom views its internal affairs as intensely private, its wariness about diplomatic missions prying into issues related to sensitive subject of human rights, and its embarrassment at diplomats witnessing events that could reflect negatively on the country. To date, no official SAG complaint has been lodged with the Embassy or Consulate General concerning the incident. END COMMENT.

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